

IAN McLEAN

Paper Tigers: *The New Iconoclasm and Identity Politics*



... you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire.

Deuteronomy 7:5, c. 640 BC

"We cannot," Oscar Wilde wrote in 1889, "re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be."¹ But this is exactly what historians do: they rewrite stories to gratify their moral sensibilities. Currently being written out of history and so out of the future is the moral ascendancy of Western civilisation and its icons of power. This was patently evident in an open letter posted on *Artnews* (online) on 21 March 2017. Announcing they were the future, "a youthful coalition of artists and scholars of colour"² chastised two Asian-American curators of the *Whitney Biennial* for exhibiting Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016), a painting protesting racial violence.³ The issue was not Schutz's protest but her heritage, which was named with the race term "White". Penned by Hannah Black, a thirty six-year-old black British artist with a Master of Fine Arts from Goldsmiths University of London and signed by nearly fifty co-signatories (the "youthful coalition"), the letter asked the curators "to remove" the offending item "with the urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum." The nub of their argument: "White free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights." So, "The painting must go."⁴

Wilde didn't take ethics out of aesthetics but made aesthetics the benchmark of ethics. In thus making aesthetics the measure of ethics, he designated it a sacred practice, to the point of defending the art of a (probable) serial murderer, Australia's most acclaimed colonial portraitist, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. As if also believing art was a sacred enterprise, the Cuban-American artist and curator Coco Fusco fumed in disbelief at Black's letter: "I find it alarming and entirely wrongheaded to call for the censorship and destruction of an artwork, no matter what its content is or who made it." Fusco added an additional ethical imperative: Black "presumes an ability to speak for all black people that smacks of a cultural nationalism that has rarely served black women."⁵

Fusco thus points to the morality driving this new iconoclasm: identity politics. No wonder she bristled. For several decades she has been at the forefront of efforts to revoke the ethnocentric arrogance of identity politics, of, in this case, the Western artworld. Fusco fought for inclusion, not exclusion. Australian indigenous academic Marcia Langton made a similar point in 1994: "There is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make 'better' representations of us simply because, it is argued, being Aboriginal gives a 'greater' understanding. This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated Other."⁶

While Fusco wasn't the only individual quick to return fire, the institutions seemed less perturbed, as if secure in their power. The *Whitney Biennial*, for example, refused to censor Schutz's painting but did allow protestors to politely mount a vigil in front of it, effectively blocking its view and at the same time transforming a pedestrian work into a more interesting performative piece. In the process, it increased exposure of the *Biennial*, Schutz's offending painting, and in the most reproduced photograph of the debacle, Parker Bright (one of the "youthful coalition") obscuring the painting's view with his 'Black Death Spectacle' T-shirt. Most of all, it affirmed the *Whitney Biennial's* artworld authority.

A few months later Stephen Townes was equally cool-headed when he asked for his paintings depicting Nat Turner's slave rebellion⁷ be removed from public view following an African-American employee of the gallery objecting to portraits of black men with nooses around their necks. While insisting he had intended to "honour the countless black men and women that fought against slavery... [and] not to fetishise Black pain"⁸ Townes thought it important to respect the feelings of the offended employee. This was not a case of identity politics – Townes is African-American – but of objections to art's sacred rights, some would insist duty, to challenge and offend. It thus went to the heart of modernism's iconoclastic *raison d'être*, expressed in George Orwell's maxim: "Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." Townes replaced his paintings with a gesture to minimalism, in which a blue tape wall drawing traced the edges of the removed painting, like police tape around a crime scene.

In both these examples iconoclasm was revealed to be a paper tiger, as it provided an opportunity for the artwork to reiterate its authority. Parker Bright seems to know this better than anyone. He is now protesting the use of the widely disseminated image of him in front of Schutz's painting by the French-Algerian installation artist Neïl Beloufa.⁹ Bright instagrammed: "How many times will images of me be used by white/*non Black (Beloufa is French-Algerian) artists for fine art or for products????... Literally using my likeness for your 'powerful' work, like u didn't do anything but put me on a mirror 🙄 FUCK U PAY ME."

THE ICON AND THE SACRED ARCHIVE

Traditional iconoclasts (from the Greek *eikon*: "likeness, image"; *klastes*: "breaker") destroy religious images (icons) for religious reasons. However, iconoclasts don't destroy icons because they are against icons. Iconoclasts are iconophiles, not iconophobes; they buy into the sacred power of icons. There is secret pact between the making and unmaking of icons, an aesthetic game of thrones that distributes political power.

Icons are images that declare their power by distinguishing the divine from the mundane. As such they are a licence issued by the gods for political or earthly power. Stored and guarded in the archive (from the Greek *arkhi*: "first, chief, ruler, primeval") – not any archive but the sacred Archive that was Derrida's subject in *Archive Fever*, icons are documents that "state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law." The first archive was a secret cave, more lately churches and museums, where special signs (icons) are gathered into "a single corpus... a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration"¹⁰ – what the art museum calls "the canon". This "single corpus" is the sacred Archive. In hiding behind the skirts of the priests, or archivists, political or earthly power anchors itself in a spiritual or metaphysical domain. Sovereignty – the power to make the law – is ultimately won and lost at the entrance of the Archive, not from the barrel of the gun.

The Archive is a site of iconophilic obsession, but the single corpus that is the Archive is never a settled thing. It must be continuously reiterated, which is how icons are remade and unmade. The most powerful art in the Archive is always the most iconic, but in times of change iconoclasm comes to the fore to enhance the Archive's agency. Schutz's and Townes' paintings were iconoclastic as they spoke against the residual iconic power of white mythology – in this case the context was 'Black Lives Matter' and the apparent impunity of the police in killing black people on North American streets. The attempts to censor these works were also iconoclastic, and also made in the name of Black Lives Matter. In testing the limits of what is permissible, each affirms the Archive's function as the mediator of symbolic power.

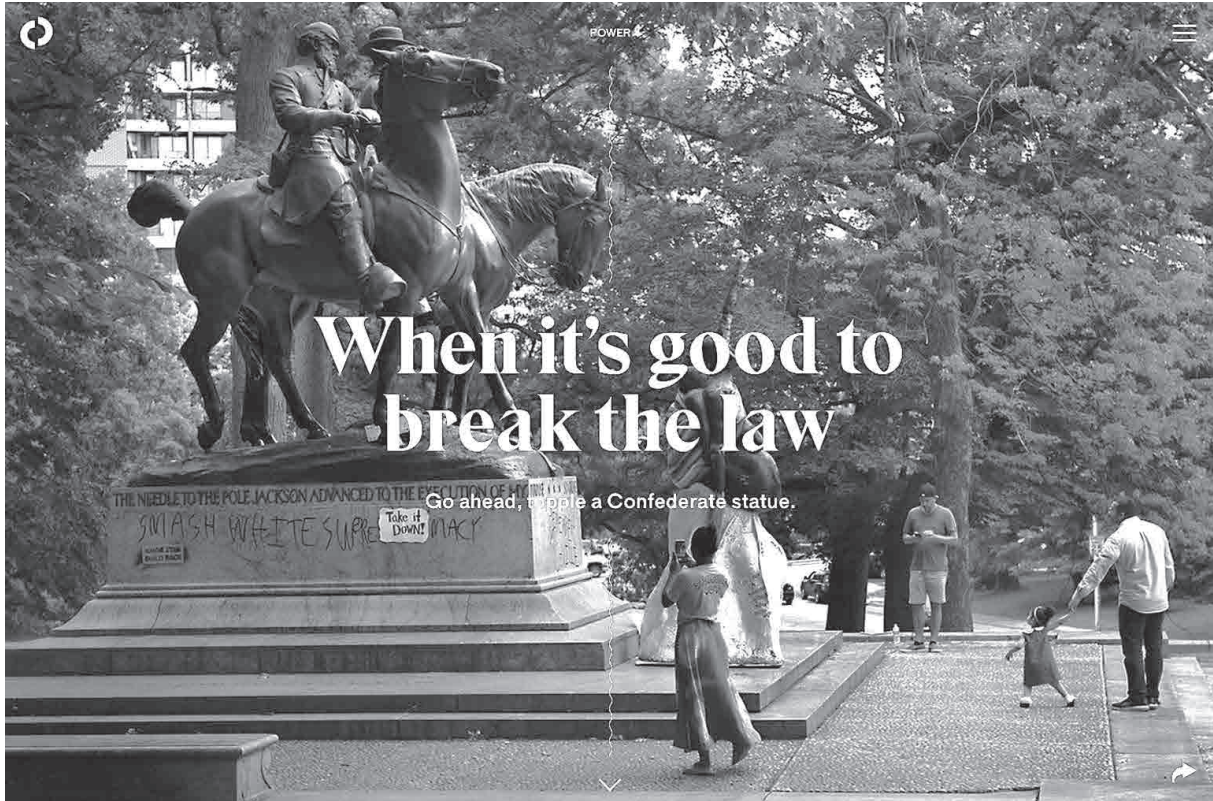
A BRIEF HISTORY OF ICONOCLASTIC ART

Western art descends directly from religious icons and is a consequence of the separation of the state and religion in Europe. These new secular states, consummated in the nation-state, transferred the Archive from the secret caves of cathedrals (usually the sacristy or crypt) and palaces to state monuments and museums. Here statues and portraits of secular heroes such as Captain James Cook (the Christopher Columbus of Australia), American Civil War Confederate generals and revolutionary heroes, became the new icons – modern versions of gods, saints and ancestral heroes.

Iconoclasm thrived in Western art during the previous two hundred years because of modernity's relentless assault on tradition. The twentieth century, especially the first half, was extremely iconoclastic, so much so that by the 1950s the avant-garde had stormed the Archive. Thereby absorbed into its corpus, modernist art became the new icons, and its defining iconoclasm was an empty gesture, as in Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). Made with de Kooning's blessing it quickly became a postmodern icon.

As the Western avant-garde settled into a self-satisfied sense of achievement, the need for iconoclasm – which is unabated – found other avenues, in the streets but also the studios of non-Western artists. Iconoclasm had, of course, come from the streets before this. In every revolution the masses pull down the statues of those it is moved to overthrow, and the streets have always been the source of minor eruptions and infringements. For example, on 10 March 1914, at the height of the avant-garde's iconoclastic assaults, the Canadian journalist Mary Richardson concealed a cleaver in her bag and entering London's National Gallery slashed Velasquez's iconic *Rokeby Venus*. Given her timing it could be read as a Futurist action – let's call it "*Slashed Rokeby Venus*" – but the Futurists didn't claim her as one of their own. Richardson was a political revolutionary, not an avant-gardist. She targeted her icon well, as "*Slashed Rokeby Venus*" was made in the name of feminism, and specifically Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which today would be banned as a terrorist organisation. Richardson struck at other symbols of the phallogocentric state, even bombing a railway station. She later became head of the women's section of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. Perhaps she really was a Futurist.

Even though there are echoes of contemporary futurist art in Richardson's "*Slashed Rokeby Venus*" and it anticipates by some thirty-five years Lucio Fontana's slashed monochromes (*Concetto spaziale*, 1959), her iconoclasm wasn't, to my knowledge, ever regarded as a work of art. There was more than enough iconoclasm in modernism at the time. This was not the case with iconoclastic actions coming from the street, and especially from non-Western sources. For example, Al-Qaeda's riveting fully televised demolition in 2001 of Minoru Yamasaki's modernist icon, New York's Twin Towers was immediately declared a work of art. Shortly after the attack the renowned German composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, pronounced it "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos."¹¹ Damien Hirst believed it was intentionally planned for its aesthetic affect: "The thing about '9/11' is that it's kind of an artwork in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually."¹² Al-Qaeda had seemingly keyed into late twentieth century postmodern aspirations but with a much greater grasp of spectacle. Yamasaki's buildings were Charles Jencks' (the postmodernist architectural critic) pet hates. Jencks had applauded the official visually stunning dynamiting of Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project in St. Louis in 1972 as the death of modernist architecture.¹³



If Stockhausen's and Hirst's instincts to incorporate '9/11' into the Archive were a canny way to transform the Al-Qaeda death machine into a postmodern paper tiger, they were misconceived. This new Islamic iconoclasm was inaugurated by the fatwa on Salman Rushdie for his celebrated postmodern novel *The Satanic Verses* published in 1988, which called not just for the burning of the book but also for Rushdie's head. By coincidence the fatwa was issued on Valentine's Day 1989, the 210th anniversary of Captain James Cook's death and the day Rushdie attended the funeral of his close friend, writer Bruce Chatwin.

FAST FORWARD

Fast forward to the recent left activist identity-politics fuelled iconoclasm of Hannah Black *et al.* They might sound a similar note to the occasional iconoclastic skirmishes of far-right religious activists – in for example, attacks on the photographs of Andreas Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe – but the trajectory is very different. The leftist iconoclasts are overtly political rather than religious, young, and include a coalition of emerging artists.

Unlike the religious right, the leftist iconoclasts mainly strike at art that has outlived its time. It kicked off with the violent student campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, to which the university authorities quickly capitulated in April 2015, suggesting how little they had invested in this statue. This iconoclastic sentiment against statuary quickly spread to the USA, where it received an extra push from the Black Lives Matter movement formed in 2014. The tipping point was the shooting in June 2015 of nine African-Americans in a church in Charleston by a twenty-one year-old white supremacist who had posted online photos of himself with his pet icon, the Confederate Flag. Within days the flag, long an icon of white supremacism, ceased to be flown on state government buildings and was withdrawn from sale, and an emboldened broad iconoclastic coalition, from leftist iconoclasts to Republican governors, began demanding the removal of the numerous statues of Civil War Confederate heroes. The process rapidly accelerated following the deadly confrontation in Charlottesville between white supremacists and leftist iconoclasts in August 2017, and within a month about twenty-five such statues had been decommissioned and another twenty were slated for removal.¹⁴

All this action around symbols, especially in the form of statues, was too good an opportunity for the artworld to pass up. In November 2017, one hundred and twenty prominent artists and scholars, including Claire Bishop, Lucy Lippard, Hal Foster and Martha Rosler called for the removal of the Christopher Columbus monument in Columbus Circle, and two other monuments in New York they found politically offensive. You can be sure that these keepers of the Faith do not perceive the current activist-driven iconoclasm as a threat to the Archive in which they serve. Unlike eighty of their colleagues in America's National Academy, including Marina Abramovic, Chuck Close, Ed Ruscha, Cindy Sherman and Kara Walker, Bishop, Lippard, Foster and Rosler did not come to Schutz's defence when protestors sought to close an exhibition of her work at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston that opened shortly after the *Whitney Biennial*. Here one senses battle lines within the Archive.

I wonder what Foster's position is on Sam Durant—an artist on whom he has written favourably and the creator of the only significant contemporary artwork to be totally destroyed in the new iconoclasm—though this time from Native American activists, who seem to have a better eye than the leftists. Durant is a well-established social and political activist artist whose projects address issues of race, including Native American history. He is currently researching Confederate monuments and memorials. However, very shortly after the Schutz affair his activist art on behalf of the oppressed came unstuck with *Scaffold* (2012), a large celebrated artwork that had featured in *dOCUMENTA 13*, (2012). The Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, known for its critically acclaimed program, had purchased *Scaffold* for \$450,000 as a centrepiece in their revamped Sculpture Garden, part of an extensive remodelling of the gallery that opened in June 2017.

Scaffold appropriated seven gallows used in executions of people on the losing side of class war, colonial genocide and slavery, including the gallows in the largest mass hangings in North American history, of thirty-eight Dakota men at Mankota, Minnesota (1862). Durant conceived *Scaffold* as a critique of state sanctioned murder. The appropriated gallows were arranged into a single corpus so that visitors could climb between them as if it was a playground. "It was all to scale," said Durant, and "designed in such a way to retain some of that iconic visual presence." The USA has not dealt with its history at all—it is interesting to compare it to Germany for instance, where everywhere one goes, there are monuments, memorials or markers to The Holocaust. It is taught, it is integral to the curriculum; it is part of the fabric of German society: "Never again."¹⁵

The Sculpture Garden was on traditional Dakota land, about 100km north of Mankato, and the mass hangings are etched into Dakota memory. The local Dakota community rallied in protests against the work. The Walker had not consulted them: they were not intimates of the Minneapolis art scene. The Walker had also not consulted them on the Jimmie Durham retrospective due to open at the same time, which caused consternation amongst a large number of Native Americans. Durham, many years self-exiled in Europe, is the most celebrated Native American contemporary artist, but many Cherokee deny his claims to being one of them and sought to sanction the exhibition. The Cherokee have their own embattled Archive, but the Dakota were focused on *Scaffold*. They wanted it burnt in a cleansing ceremony, and that's what happened with Durant's and the Walker Art Centre's agreement. Durant had everything to gain: publicity, being on the right side of history, and the ritual immolation was a performative extension of his original iconoclastic idea that, in its meditation on death and redemption, provided a suitable spiritual closing to the project. Besides, it was a conceptual artwork. It existed as an idea, or more accurately a plan, and could be easily reconstructed, which it can be if the Dakota so want, as Durant gave them the intellectual rights, a clever way for him to preserve the artwork.

AUSTRALIA

Statues of the same vintage and aesthetic value as the Civil War Confederate generals being removed from parks are also under fire in Australia. Those of Captain James Cook are the favoured target. His statue in Hyde Park, Sydney, has been graffitied as part of Australia Day protests in the previous few years, and this year pink paint was splashed over his statue in the Melbourne seaside suburb of St. Kilda. This was not mindless vandalism as several civic leaders claimed, but a deliberate iconoclastic act conducted with some rhetorical flair as the opening salvo in the 'Invasion Day' protests against Australia Day. Australia Day and Invasion Day, celebrate and resist, respectively 26 January 1788, the iconic date on which the First Fleet, of navy and convict ships, arrived at



Sydney Cove, when the first European settlement was established on the continent. Cook wasn't there. Long dead, he had been cannibalised in Hawai'i nine years earlier. Not much actually happened on that summer's day. No 'invasion' was launched – this wouldn't come for another thirty years or more – though the ships had made the short trip from Botany Bay, where they had made landfall a week earlier. But there was no general disembarkation once the ships had anchored in the cove. This would occur in stages over the next several days and the official proclamation wasn't made until 7 February, what the colony's Governor Arthur Phillip called "the memorable day which established a regular form of Government on the coast of New South Wales."¹⁶

However, this is far too much historical detail for the symbolic language of art. As artists will attest, too many facts complicate the truth and get in the way of a good icon. This is why Australia Day is 26 January, and statues of Cook and not Phillip are the icons of invasion. Unlike Phillip, Cook has entered indigenous as well as settler lore in the Pacific and Australia as an ancestral being. With the 1988 Australian Bicentenary the iconic power of Cook gained a new life. In 1987, prompted by the coming Bicentenary celebrations, the Arnheim Land artist Paddy Fordham Wainburranga began a series of paintings depicting a very Macassan-looking ancestral Cook, which he titled *Too Many Captain Cooks*.¹⁷ The Bicentenary was also the year in which the first indigenous Mardi Gras float appeared in Sydney's Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras. It featured a black Captain Cook. The idea of the indigenous activist and dancer Malcolm Cole, helped by sound artist Panos Couros and costume designer Anemaree Dalziel, he was fitted into a splendid oversized dandified uniform. The *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper reported, "It will be hard to miss the tall, striking figure of dancer Malcolm Cole dressed as Captain Cook with a black Sir Joseph Banks and two black sailors beside him in a boat pulled by white men. What Captain Cook thought about being mimicked by an Aboriginal in a parade with a blue elephant, a condom over its trunk... is anybody's guess."¹⁸

Jump thirty years to 2018, WAR (Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance), the indigenous activist group who help organise Invasion Day, also have a keen rhetorical sense in their iconoclastic lashing of Australia Day: "WAR will not rest until we burn this entire rotten settler colony called Australia, illegally and violently imposed on stolen Aboriginal land at the expense of the blood of countless thousands, to the f..king ground... F..k your flag, your anthem and your precious national day... Abolish Australia, not just Australia Day."¹⁹

The dandification or pinkification of the rather humourless Edwardian statue of the St. Kilda Cook standing tall, prim and self-satisfied like a good Englishman, had a lighter but equally affective rhetoric. I doubt that this large pink splatter painting was intended as a wry or even celebratory joke on rumours of Cook being gay (same sex marriage had just been legalised through a national referendum), but it made this black suburban phallus – its bronze heavily oxidised – into a silly icon of white power, whereas I had hardly noticed it before despite having lived nearby for many years. Quickly cleaned by the local Council all was soon back to normal, the statue returned to a smudge on the St. Kilda foreshore.

If the leftist iconoclasts are speaking to power from the margins, the Archive has not flinched. The greying academic statues in park corners and the overgrown concrete jungles of our cities have long lost their lustre. They were put out to pasture long ago. If the several statues of Cook scattered across Australia have lost their aesthetic presence as icons, the figure of Cook hasn't. It still is the conquistador of the Australian imagination. Symbolism is an emotional thing, which is why



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it's about getting the aesthetics right, even if it means fudging the history. Cook's presence as an icon, an image of power in the Archive, is still felt, but not in the Edwardian statue on the Melbourne waterfront or Sydney's Hyde Park. These days we feel it most in the contemporary paintings of Australian indigenous artists Gordon Bennett and Daniel Boyd, as in Bennett's *Notes to Basquiat (Death of Irony)* (2002), which depicts a pink-coloured Cook directing the planes towards the Twin Towers. Bennett's iconoclasm was unmatched in his day, but as aesthetic iconoclasts tend to do, Bennett played against, and so to, the Archive and it welcomed him inside. It was and is business as usual.

Notes

¹ Oscar Wilde, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', *Intentions*, New York: Brentano's, 1905, p. 90

² Coco Fusco, 'Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till', *Hyperallergic*, 27 March 2017; <https://hyperallergic.com/368290/censorship-not-the-painting-must-go-on-dana-schutzs-image-of-emmett-till/>; accessed 13 March 2018

³ Her painting was based on a photograph of Emmett Till's battered body in a casket. Till was a fourteen-year old African-American who was badly beaten and murdered in 1955. An all-white jury acquitted those charged with his murder

⁴ The full letter can be seen at <http://www.artnews.com/2017/03/21/the-painting-must-go-hannah-black-pens-open-letter-to-the-whitney-about-controversial-biennial-work/>

⁵ Coco Fusco, op cit.

⁶ Marcia Langton, 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of representation', *Race and Class* 35/4, 1994, pp. 95-96

⁷ A slave rebellion that took place August 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia in which rebel slaves killed over fifty white people

⁸ Cara Ober, 'Provocative Nat Turner-Inspired Portraits Fuel Debate After Their Removal', *Hyperallergic*, 8 September 2017; <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Cara+Ober,+%E2%80%98Provocative+Nat+Turner-Inspired+Portraits+Fuel+Debate+After+Their+Removal%E2%80%99,+Hyperallergic,+8+September+2017&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>; accessed 13 March 2018

⁹ Beloufa printed the image on a mirror for his exhibition, *L'ennemi de mon ennemi (The enemy of my enemy)*, Palais de Tokyo, 2018

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics* 25/2, 1995, p. 10

¹¹ Terry Castle, 'Stockhausen, Karlheinz The unsettling question of the Sublime', *New York Magazine*, 27 August 2011; <http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/karlheinz-stockhausen/>; accessed 13 March 2018

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11>

¹³ See Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, ch. 5

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/16/us/confederate-monuments-removed.html>

¹⁵ Carolina Miranda, 'Artist Sam Durant was pressured into taking down his "Scaffold". Why doesn't he feel censored?', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 2017

¹⁶ Arthur Phillip, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay With an Account of the Establishment of the Colonies of Port Jackson and Norfolk Island* (1789), Gutenberg Press ebook, 2005

¹⁷ Paddy Fordham Wainburranga painted many variations of *Too Many Captain Cooks* from 1987 until the late 1990s. He died in 2006

¹⁸ John Stapelton, 'It's the black and white Mardi Gras', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 1988; see <http://reconciliation.tripod.com/malcolm-cole.htm>

¹⁹ Richard Ferguson, 'WAR activists ramp up calls to "burn this colony"', *The Australian*, 30 January 2018; <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/war-activists-ramp-up-calls-to-burn-this-colony/news-story/9603540c4d035c226a4f50b309ee585f>

